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'Inspired to be Creative?'

Citation for published version:

Sabeti, S 2015, "Inspired to be Creative?": 'Persons', 'objects' and the public pedagogy of museums', *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, vol. 46, no. 2, pp. 113-128. <https://doi.org/10.1111/aeq.12094>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1111/aeq.12094](https://doi.org/10.1111/aeq.12094)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Anthropology & Education Quarterly

Publisher Rights Statement:

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‘Inspired to be Creative?’: ‘persons’, ‘objects’ and the public pedagogy of museums.

Introduction.

Museums and galleries have come under increasing pressure from policy agendas in the last decade or so to justify their existence as ‘public’ institutions through their roles as educators. In the past this function may have been seen to operate implicitly through the display of artifacts, or the curation of exhibitions. However, the ‘educational’ remit is now being made much more explicit through the creation of museum Education Departments whose job it is to privilege ‘learners’ over ‘objects’ (Bayne et al. 2009). These departments organize tours, lectures, classes, workshops and events but are also developing on-line learning spaces, interactive displays and working towards digitizing their collections to address issues of access. While there has been some research on the use of new technologies as a way of engaging and educating the public about museum collections, there has been relatively little attention paid to more conventional practices such as classes and workshops (Bayne et al. 2009; Black 2012). These attempt to bring about a participatory role for the public by concentrating either on the ‘appreciation’ or ‘interpretation’ of artifacts in the collection, or on how those artifacts can be used to inspire personal creativity. This paper takes as its focus one adult creative writing class based at a major urban art gallery in the United Kingdom. This class meets once a fortnight, alternating between a tour of exhibitions and a session where pieces of writing completed in the intervening period are shared and commented upon. Its pedagogical aim is to facilitate an ‘inspirational’ encounter between class members and the museum’s collection of art objects, an encounter that will result in the creation of another kind of art object – a literary text.

I place this ethnographic study broadly within the context of debates in ‘public pedagogy’ and museum education; the detailed analysis, however, is concerned with the idea of ‘creativity’. I am interested in how the public pedagogy of the museum implicitly theorizes creativity on the one hand, and on how creativity is actually experienced by those that attend the class on the other. Alfred Gell’s work on art and agency, as well as Tim Ingold’s writings about creativity, provide a helpful descriptive vocabulary to draw out these pedagogies. I do not attempt to forward a ‘theory’ of creativity or agency itself; but I highlight *assumptions about creativity* in educational planning and contrast this with the claims made by learners/creators (the members of the creative writing class). In doing so, I hope to prompt reflection on the roles of both ‘persons’ and ‘objects’ in museum learning programs and how the needs of class participants might be better addressed.

Museum Education and Public Pedagogy.

The role that museums have undertaken falls comfortably within the broad definition of the concept of ‘public pedagogy’ as ‘educational activity and learning’ that takes place in ‘spaces and discourses’ that exist outside of formal educational institutions (Sandlin et al. 2011:338). It has been pointed out that the term ‘public pedagogy’ is under-theorized and ill-defined both in terms of what is meant by ‘public’ and what is meant by ‘pedagogy’ (Sandlin et al. 2011). The term ‘public pedagogy’ is most frequently associated with Henry Giroux and his considerable body of work in the area; in this he seeks to explore the ways in which ‘pedagogy functions on local and global levels to secure and challenge the ways in which power is deployed, affirmed, and resisted within and outside traditional discourses and cultural spheres’ (Giroux 2004a:73). Giroux’s preoccupation with cultural politics (in particular with the hegemony of neo-liberalism) presents a sociological analysis of popular

culture but does not explore the educational process itself. Indeed, there is little research generally on how or why ‘public pedagogies’ are enacted, what the roles of the ‘educators’ and the ‘public’ might be in these processes, and how these sites and practices actually play out in educational terms.

Biesta’s recent work (2012) has attempted to address some of these gaps by exploring in *theoretical* detail what we might mean by a pedagogy that is truly ‘public’. Rather than locating this in the concepts of teaching/instruction (a ‘pedagogy *for* the public’), or in what he calls the all pervasive ‘learning regime’ (‘a pedagogy *of* the public’), Biesta sees the true potential of public pedagogy as taking place at ‘the *intersection* of education and politics’ (2012:693), that is ‘as an enactment of a concern for publicness’ (2012:694). In Biesta’s terms then we might view museum education as an instance of where ‘pedagogy becomes an active and deliberate intervention in the ‘public sphere’, and is arguably an attempt to restore the ‘publicness’ of the museum space (2012:691). Much of the research which focuses on the public pedagogy of museums in particular, explores how either displayed objects or participatory practices can be manipulated to bring about critical engagements with collections (Borg and Mayo 2010; Grenier 2010; Trofanenko 2006) or to ‘inspire’ a social awareness in the public by acting as ‘sites of conscience’ (Kridel 2010). Work on the educational role of museums from a museum studies perspective, on the other hand, tends to consist of discussions about how its objects are *interpreted* both through curation and tours (Hooper-Greenhill 2000) and how museums can work towards bringing about more inclusive or ‘collaborative’ pedagogies (Golding 2009). Even discussions of creativity tend to focus on the transformative potential of the objects in the collection (Black 2012). So while there has been a shift from ‘object’ to ‘person’ (and, in particular, that ‘person’ as learner) primary importance is still placed on the value of the object itself. The focus tends to be on what

people can learn *from* the objects and is usually tied to the idea of becoming a ‘critical’ or ‘creative’ subject.

‘Painting Words’: a gallery education class.

My project centers on one long-running creative writing class based at an art gallery in a large city in the United Kingdom. The works of this gallery are dispersed across four buildings in the city that house different categories of art objects classified according to genre or historical date. At the time of writing this class has been in existence for five years and continues to meet. The membership, like the longevity of the class, has remained surprisingly stable (there are fourteen members) and there are strong relationships in evidence between its members. They are, excepting one, all in their fifties, sixties or seventies and most are retired from traditional middle-class professions such as teaching, journalism or administration. Those who still work do so on a part-time or freelance basis – one is a freelance journalist, another a composer and piano teacher. The timing of the class, which takes place once a fortnight on a Monday morning, has to some extent determined this demographic, and perhaps the stable nature of the membership. A significant proportion of the group travel into the city by train, a convenient mode of transport as the main gallery building is situated next to the city’s main train station. Many of them also belong to other writing groups and they attend these at different times of the week; in these they usually discuss longer pieces of work or ongoing writing projects. A number of the female members of the group regularly lunch together following a session; it has become customary to organize an ‘end of term’ group meal which most members attend. While some of the members see others in the group only in the session, it is also clear that some strong friendships have been formed.

The tour and writing sessions are led by individuals who describe themselves as ‘gallery educators’. In the case of the tour, this is sometimes a permanent member of gallery staff (a curator, member of the Education Department) but in most instances it is either a practicing artist or art historian who is employed by the gallery on a freelance basis. The writing sessions are led by freelance but published writers – usually one of three individuals, depending on availability. The group was set up at the instigation of a member of the gallery Education Department who uses her small budget to organize workshops for the public and has introduced many innovative multi-arts events and classes; she also, outside of her official remit, raises funds for one-off exhibitions and interactive events which she thinks will attract broader audiences. ‘Painting Words’, as this Group came to call themselves, is now self-funding in that the members have elected a ‘finance officer’ who collects, banks and administers the funds when necessary. They pay the writers and tour guides through this fund without the money going through the gallery, as is the case with all other classes that are run there. This situation has evolved over the years and the Group are resourceful when funds are thin on the ground – they have, on several occasions, conducted ‘self-led sessions’ in order to save money. It has exclusively been the case that the ‘educator’ sacrificed on these occasions has been the tour guide and not the writer, a point I will return to later. During tours the Group are usually shown a selection of artworks from current exhibitions and are invited to discuss these particular works with the guide and each other as they stand in front of the object itself. Members arrive at writing sessions with photocopies of their written work that are then distributed in turns. In the last two years, and after some debate and disgruntlement at the time allocated to some people’s work over others, it was decided to introduce a kitchen timer into the session. The writing sessions – half an hour longer than the tours, at two and a half hours – are divided equally amongst those present and the timer is set accordingly. The written work, once distributed, is not re-collected by the author.

Methodology.

The research presented here was based upon a mix of qualitative methodologies including long-term participant observation, field notes taken at all Group sessions and a series of semi-structured interviews with museum educators and Group members. The research was started in April 2010 and is still ongoing at the time of writing. Each of these participants has been interviewed once so far; the majority of these interviews took place in public spaces (for example, cafés) but some individuals were interviewed in their own homes. I have transcribed the bulk of interviews myself. The transcripts were then thematically coded according to my interest in the role assigned to art objects, the roles assigned to group members and to educators, and discussions of creativity and inspiration. While most museum visitors tend to be irregular or infrequent, this class provided the opportunity to engage with a stable and long-term group of those visitors. Members of the class had an ongoing relationship with the museum space and its objects that could be traced through ethnographic fieldwork. Furthermore, the ethnography revealed a series of insights into the process of literary creativity – a process that often occurs in private spaces when individuals are alone. By attending all the sessions I was able to observe the relationship between the tours and the writing, the art objects and the individuals, the gallery educators and the group members, and how all of these interacted in the complex process of creating.

As a veteran of creative writing classes myself, and someone with a background in the high school teaching of English, there was a natural affinity with the members of this class. I come from a similar social and educational background as them and we shared interests and knowledge (particularly about literature). While this made it easier to ‘fit in’, it may also

mean that there are limitations to what I am able to see. The interviews I conducted often turned into conversations where I also reflected on my own experiences of writing, or trying to write. The Group is very close-knit and there was a waiting list of those eager to join if space became available. They were very careful about being fair and when I asked to join the Group after a few initial observations, I was rejected. Crestfallen at losing the opportunity of a rich field site, I subsequently spent several months simply interviewing those who were willing. It was somehow through these interviews, and through the persistence of Jenny (the facilitator of the class), that I was finally accepted as a full paying member. I am currently the youngest member of the Group, the only one in full-time employment and the only one responsible for caring for two young children. This difference is highlighted when I appear every now and then at Group sessions with nothing to offer in the way of writing. I am often jokingly reprimanded for this but there is a general understanding of what they perceive to be a 'busier' time of life than their own. Many of them take an interest in my family (I became a mother for the second time as a member of the Group) and compare notes with their own now long past experiences as parents of young children. On one occasion there was even a mediated exchange of stories, drawings and emails between one Group member and my elder son. All the members of the Group are local to the part of the U.K. in which the research was conducted and have a strong sense of identity associated with it. In this sense again I differed from them – I grew up at the other end of the country, the child of an immigrant middle-class family. This, however, was a difference that surfaced very rarely in our conversations and interactions.

At Group sessions [which I do not record] I take detailed field notes which I then write up fully afterwards. Recently I have begun to incorporate photographs, either of objects participants bring to sessions or artifacts [the egg timer they use to time feedback on their

work; individual's notebooks or edited drafts of work] of the Group and incorporate them into my field notes. I also note down and find copies of the artworks and keep these for reference. I collect and keep the work of Group members in plastic pockets along with my field notes and photographs. Other than using extracts from my field notes, I have not included any of these in this paper.

This project was originally conceived out of an interest in the relationship between visually perceived art objects and the creation of text. The ethnographic insights that emerged from the work, as they always do, have thrown my own assumptions about this relationship into relief. It became apparent that while my assumptions about both the importance of the art objects and creativity were aligned with those of the museum educators (and with my own past practice as a teacher of English), the writers in the group had fundamentally different ways of seeing these concepts and relationships. To this end then, I have used the contrast between the claims made by those involved in the process of 'educating' or 'facilitating' and those of their intended audience – the 'Painting Words' group in this instance, as a structuring device to highlight the discrepancy between what is intended educationally and what is received. To reiterate, I am interested in the concept of 'creativity', and specifically in where the agency for that creativity is located by the subjects of my research. Taking the claims of the participants seriously, I argue, enables us to better understand how 'persons' and 'objects' interact and what it is that education within museum contexts can offer the public.

In the sections that follow I first look at the 'Painting Words' group as an example of public pedagogy by viewing the class through the lens of official gallery documentation - advertising, publicity leaflets, catalogues – and interviews with gallery employees. I take particular note of their language, their expectations of, and their concerns about the Group. I

then turn to the articulations of the Group themselves, the role they assign to the art objects, the gallery educators and to each other. As I indicated earlier, in describing and analyzing these claims about creativity, agency, inspiration and the role of art objects, I employ the work of Alfred Gell and Tim Ingold whose theories are appropriately based on their own ethnographic insights.

‘Painting Words’ – an example of public pedagogy.

The gallery’s adult education program, according to their own publicity, ‘aims to inform, inspire and stimulate and to encourage enjoyment and exploration of the national art collection’. Their series of ‘Workshops and Practical Courses’ are billed in this way, ‘Inspired to be creative? There are lots of things to try throughout the year.’ As well as advertising these classes on their web site, one can pick up a ‘What’s On’ leaflet from the front desk, or printed flyers about individual classes from holders which are attached to the wall in between the public lavatories and the entrance to the Education Centre. There are also posters inside the lavatories and inside the doors of individual cubicles. On these flyers the vocabulary of ‘inspiration’ and ‘creativity’ is both explicit and implied; for example, ‘Artist X introduces a different range of techniques in each session inspired by works of art on show in the gallery. With step-by-step guidance participants will be encouraged to create their own modern masterpiece...’ or ‘See how others have portrayed the human figure, then work from a model...’. Other classes are described as being ‘inspired by Peploe’, ‘inspired by Turner’, ‘inspired by Visions of India’. The advertisements are also careful to emphasize the non-intimidating nature of these classes, using words such as ‘helped’, ‘encouraged’, ‘guided’, ‘friendly discussion’, ‘explanation’ clearly casting the gallery educators in pastoral, affective roles, as intermediaries between the general public and the intimidating world of art. It is

these two points that I wish to draw out – the role of the gallery staff and the role they assign to the art objects.

I interviewed Lilly, a regular gallery guide, in her own artist's studio in the north of the city. She settled on the word 'educator' to describe her job after toying with 'facilitator' and 'enabler'. She explained this further:

I think [it is about] encouraging people to be inspired by the artwork and feel that they can come back. I think it's important to get people into the building and for them to know that it's there and that it's comfortable to use.

Her understanding of her role as an intermediary who enables an engagement between 'people', the institution and the art is clear. As is an implicit acknowledgement of the fact that this may involve some emotional work on her part in 'encouraging' and making the experience 'comfortable'. Lilly's own work was abstract and inspired, she told me, by derelict urban landscapes. As a consequence she had a preference for discussing more modern artworks and the issue of accessibility was important to her. I noticed on tours that she asked open questions of the Group: 'How does that one make you feel?'; 'What are you thinking about?'; 'Do you like it?'. One of the other artists who frequently conducted tours had a slightly different perspective. Tanya and I met over a coffee one afternoon to discuss her role and her own take on creativity. She often went to the gallery to find inspiration for her own work which was largely in engravings, wood cuts and paper cuts. Reflecting on her work at the gallery, she told me:

I suppose you are giving them basic art historical information. You're fitting that person's work into a category in their mind ... and then looking at the thing itself.

Different metaphors were used in an attempt to explain the significance of the artworks in the gallery to the creative process of members of the Group. Jenny, the gallery educator who had

instigated the class, spoke about it as a ‘trigger’ for ‘writing well’; Tanya used the metaphor of ‘feeding’ to describe the relationship between the art objects and writers’ work. *All* of the gallery staff highlighted the importance of the *time* that was spent ‘looking’ at the artworks – a desirable contrast to the usual gallery-goer who ‘drifts’, and appears unengaged. As people who work in, around and for the gallery, the importance of the engagement with art objects is clear. It is also significant that for some of them, the aesthetic properties of those objects is what makes them ‘rich’ or ‘inspirational’ in the first place. Jenny said:

If you’re looking at a simple thing like a sugar bowl, you could come up with loads of things but there would be a limitation. You’re starting from a very, very narrow thing and then bringing it out; whereas with a painting it’s a wider thing in itself.

As well as seeing themselves in pastoral roles, they also insisted on the value of the dialogue between the ‘educator’ and the Group. Jenny was concerned with the way in which this had evolved. She asked me:

Don’t you think they’re coming now to lectures rather than actual discussions? I mean, when you come along is there a lot of talk and interaction?

She spoke about an artist who used to take the Group round when they first started meeting.

She told me that he:

Asked lots of questions so they did most of the talking. I think it’s evolved now to less talking and more listening which is not how I’d want it to be but everybody is happy with that. I liked it better when we all looked at it and nobody knew anything – nobody *needed* to know anything –now, people seem to want lots of facts.

A few years ago she organized an exhibition and a publication based on the work of this Group. For the booklet, each member of the Group submitted one piece of writing which had been ‘inspired’ by an art object in the gallery’s permanent collection. These were published,

alongside images of the artworks, and the writing pieces were reproduced on the gallery's walls outside the education centre. It was the first time the gallery had exhibited 'art objects' which were officially outside of the definition of visual art. Jenny is very proud of this and she explained that she had organized this event because she felt, 'We're ticking along here but we're not really progressing.' Now, she said:

There doesn't seem to be any drive from them wanting to do something more from it...It's a way of me stretching them out a bit more but they don't seem to want anything different. They don't seem to come forward to say, 'Can we do this?' or 'What do you think of this?' It surprises me because if I was in a Group I think I'd want another goal to aim for, like the exhibition.

Jenny's feelings, by her own admission, are based on her assumptions about what people might want, or take, from a class focused on 'creativity' in a gallery space. In organizing the exhibition she used the space of the gallery to display their work, attempting perhaps, in Biesta's terms, to 'reinvigorate' the 'publicness' of the building. In discussions with me about the Group, the gallery educators (perhaps understandably) put emphasis on the importance of their own roles, the significance of art objects and the space of the gallery as mediators of public pedagogy. However, it was also evident that, in the case of this Group, they struggled to clarify exactly what their personal role was – the interview transcripts reveal them toying with a variety of words: 'facilitator', 'educator' and so on. There was some awareness that their contribution was being excised over time. Indeed, as I indicated earlier, when funds were short, the group members simply led the tour sessions themselves. Jenny's frustrations have partly arisen because she feels that there is no 'educational work' for her to do - she speaks of wanting to 'stretch' the Group and give them 'goals to aim for', but they seem content on continuing with what she perceives as a repetitive cycle.

The dilemma of how to ‘educate for creativity’ is addressed here through the idea of ‘inspiration’; what the gallery is able to offer the creatively aspiring public, of course, is its art objects as sources of that inspiration. The gallery’s pedagogy works on the assumption that people will want to create something of their ‘own’ – ‘your own modern masterpiece’. This creative act – inspired by the rich properties of the institutionalized art object – will result in an object which is ‘new’ and which indexes the creative abilities and talents of the maker (as well as indexing the originally inspiring artists/artwork). A theory of creativity that rests on the idea of inspiration is implied therefore. In this theory, agency is located in the artwork (‘object’) and in the creator (‘person’) but in a linear flow where the object acts on the person who then acts on materials (words, paper, pen) to produce a new object. It is in this way that the ‘public pedagogy’ of the gallery attempts to play itself out – a collection of artwork (which in the case of this gallery, ‘belongs to the people’ as Jenny put it) is offered as a site of creative engagement. This idea places an importance on the encounter with the art object that is seen to be the originating impetus for the creative act. It also privileges the creator suggesting an understanding of its ‘public’ nature as situated in the power of individual thought and action. It is precisely such assumptions about creativity and agency that anthropological theories have questioned, in particular the work of Alfred Gell and Tim Ingold.

Creativity, Agency and Inspiration.

In his posthumously published *Art and Agency* (1998), Alfred Gell attempts to conceive of a theory in which art objects could act like ‘persons’ and hence possess agency and bring about changes in the world (1998:5). He is interested in the interactions and identifications of agency that circulate around art objects. Indeed to Gell, an ‘art object’ is an art object not

because of its intrinsic aesthetic quality, or its positioning within a cultural institution, but because around it there exist what he calls ‘art-like relations’. He defines a variety of terms in order to explain this network of relations; these are: ‘index’ – which he describes as the ‘material entities’ or artworks themselves; ‘artist’ – those to whom the existence of the index is attributed; the ‘recipient’ – those to whom the index is considered to ‘exert agency’ and finally, the ‘prototype’ – the entity which is supposed to be represented in the index (1998:27). It might be useful to illustrate these terms with reference to the *Mona Lisa* (an example Gell himself uses in a different context): here the painting (what we call *Mona Lisa*) is the ‘index’; Leonardo da Vinci is the ‘artist’ because it is to him that we attribute the existence of the painting; the ‘recipient’ might be the crowds who flock to the Louvre to see it (or in another context, the patron for whom it was originally painted); and the ‘prototype’ is the anonymous woman who is deemed to be represented in it – Mona Lisa (as opposed to *Mona Lisa*). An ‘art-like’ relation, Gell argues, exists when the ‘index’ allows what he calls an ‘abduction of agency’ to take place – this is an inference, which is other than semiotic, and by which we attribute a causal relation of some kind (1998:13). So when we encounter the *Mona Lisa* we infer that Leonardo da Vinci painted it, and that it looks the way it does because the sitter somehow brought their likeness to bear on it. All of Gell’s terms can exist in ‘agent’ (acting upon others) or ‘patient’ (being acted upon) positions. The ‘index’ which is the painting *Mona Lisa* can be said to act upon a viewer as an ‘agent’, but it can also exist in a ‘patient’ role if, for example, somebody was to alter or sabotage it by drawing a moustache on the lady’s upper lip, or slashing the canvas with a knife. Importantly for Gell, attributions of agency are always context-dependent and relational; the way in which I have described the relations around da Vinci’s painting is how we have come conventionally to view this particular painting. Together these sets of relations compose the ‘art nexus’ which can become an extremely complex set of agent-patient relations with ‘abductions of agency’

taking place at different hierarchical levels (1998:29).

This vocabulary, though it is unwieldy at times, does enable description. It helps us to describe simple relations such as Artist (agent) to Index (patient) where the index is regarded as a ‘trace’ of the artist’s creative performance, for example this is the way that Jackson Pollock’s drip paintings are often seen; or Index (agent) to Prototype (patient) as in the painting that features in Oscar Wilde’s *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* where the Index’s ageing causes the prototype’s good looks to be retained. However, the art nexus can also be quite ‘involute’ and enable descriptions of much more complex relations such as those of portraiture, sabotaged art, patronage and sorcery. In Gell’s theory anything, including persons, can be an art object if the relations around it are ‘art-like’.

Many have argued that Gell’s theory – though moving away from traditional ways of seeing art objects – does not move us far enough from the notion of agency as something which essentially lies in the human (Leach 2007:169; Ingold 2011:214). Indeed, Tim Ingold’s theory of agency is fundamentally opposed to Gell’s. While Gell sees both objects and persons as *possessing* agency in given contexts and having ‘effects’; Ingold argues that agency *possesses things and persons*. He advocates a move away from the language of causality that limits our thinking to interactions between already made entities, arguing instead that ‘the constituents of this world are not already thrown or cast before they can act or be acted upon. They *are* in the throwing, in the casting’ (2011:215). To Ingold, Gell’s ‘abduction of agency’ which traces causal relations is in fact a ‘backwards’ reading of creativity (2011: 215-6). The conventional theory of creativity, argue Hallam and Ingold, assumes an ‘originating intention’ in the mind of an individual; this intention is then realized in the production of something ‘new’ which is both a rupture with the past and a confirmation of that individual’s talent (2007:3). Gell is

criticized because he is concerned with tracing back relations, with looking behind persons and objects, to see where they ‘began’. Hallam and Ingold make a case for ‘creativity’ to be understood as ‘improvisation’ rather than ‘innovation’, as ‘relational’ rather than individual, and as inherently ‘temporal’ rather than a moment out of time (2007:5).

Both Gell and Ingold’s theories of creativity and agency are helpful in drawing out the ethnographic data in this paper. While Ingold’s work unsettles traditional assumptions about creativity, Gell’s helps to illuminate the claims made about the role of the art object in the creative process. Seen through Ingold’s lens the museum’s pedagogy of creativity (as inspiration) rests on a backwards reading of the creative process: it locates the source or origin of creativity in an object and implies there is a creative intention in the mind of the class member who encounters it. The Group’s own articulations – as we will see in the next section - contradict some of these assumptions. Here again Ingold’s work is helpful; however, the ethnography also reveals the limitations of Ingold’s theory of creativity - it does not always help to describe what ethnographic subjects *say* about agency and creativity. This is where the vocabulary offered by Alfred Gell becomes helpful. As I outlined earlier, I am not concerned with debates about whether or not agency exists, or where it is *actually* situated in any given set of relations. I am not interested, as Ingold is, in what creativity is and is not. Rather, I wish to take seriously the *claims* that my subjects make about ‘agency’, where *they* see it as residing in the contexts that I asked them about. With this aim in mind then, and as Henare, Holbrad and Wassell suggest, (2007:18) I read Gell’s ‘persons’ and ‘objects’ as heuristic tags that are used to account for agency, rather than as analytic terms that dictate where that agency literally lies. In doing so, I use Gell’s work *methodologically*, in order to articulate and describe the process of creativity around art objects, persons, through both a spatial and temporal dimension, from the perspective of those who are doing the creating.

‘It could be a crumpled paper-cup’: creating writing out of art objects.

The gallery’s pedagogy, as we have seen, positions the art objects as the source of creative inspiration; many of those working in the gallery also see the inspirational power of those objects as stemming from their ‘richness’ or aesthetic properties. To put it into Gell’s terminology, there is an assumption that the Index (the art object) or the Artist (painter/sculptor) will provide the Prototype for the creative writing. This assumption was in stark contrast to the claims made by members of the Painting Words group who were repeatedly dismissive of the importance of the artworks in the gallery to their own creative processes. Additionally, another discrepancy lay in the relative importance attached to their own roles as artists or agents in that process. In order to highlight these contradictions, this section follows the same pattern as the earlier section outlining the views of gallery educators: I first look at the role the Group members assign to art objects, and then look at how they view themselves.

In interviews members told me that they had come to the classes in order to write, not to appreciate art; in fact, any knowledge about art, or any increased appreciation of it, was regarded as a by-product of the process, a ‘certain flow in the other direction’, as one of them put it. As I was quite often conducting interviews over coffees or lunches, they picked on objects commonly found on the tables of cafes in order to clarify what they were saying.

John, a retired teacher of science, told me:

It could be the glass. It could be the water!

Another group member, Andrew, whose work as a composer meant that he ‘created’ in a variety of ways, insisted that it could be the ‘crumpled paper-cup’ on the table between us. He

described the art objects as simply the ‘objective limitation’ imposed on the creative process. Of course, for this Group, the creative process spans two meetings, the tour and the writing feedback. In Gell’s terms there are in fact two Artists (the painter/sculptor of the ‘inspiring’ artwork; the writer/group member); two Indexes (the painting/sculpture; the piece of writing); two Prototypes (the entity represented in the painting; that represented in the writing) and two Recipients (the Group on tour; the Group in the writing session). There are temporal complexities too, in that when the first Index (the art work in the gallery) is present, the second Index (the writing Group members will produce) is absent; in fact, it is non-existent. Similarly, when this Index is present/in existence, the first Index (which could be the Prototype for the second Index) is absent, though it is in existence. The overriding assumption in the museum’s pedagogy was that the ‘flow’ of agency, the ‘inspiration’, occurred in one direction. So, the agency of the Index/Artist on the Recipient is ‘inspirational’ and leads to another Index being produced. The artwork as ‘trigger’ or ‘starting point’ implies that once the train of creativity is initiated the work of ‘inspiration’ is done. From the Group’s point of view, however, this process was non-linear and complex.

At the start of a tour of a busy exhibition of modern art Eva, the guide on this occasion, told the Group: ‘I think it’s going to be very inspiring to you as writers.’ Another guide, Kasia, noted a few weeks later after an exhibition of still lives: ‘I think it will be quite a challenge for you to write something from this exhibition’. The Group, both on an individual basis, and as a collective, tended to be surprisingly resistant to these kinds of comments. In fact, Kirsty, a long-retired primary school teacher, revealed: ‘I don’t really like being told what is going to inspire me.’ At the end of one tour she turned to me and said, ‘I’m always so surprised by how different what they [the guides] do is from what we [the Group] do’. While many members of the Group deployed the terms ‘inspire’ and ‘inspiration’ in speaking of their own

creative process, their concept of this tended to be much more nuanced. Not only was the art object not always identified as the ‘trigger’, but ‘inspiration’ itself was quite often located elsewhere – both spatially and temporally.

Graeme, a retired economist, is a consistent writer of prose. He is an enthusiastic and erudite soccer fan and much of this knowledge finds its way into his wryly humorous pieces. He told me that one of the enjoyable aspects of the Group was that:

Quite often I’ve found that even when I’ve been to something utterly uninspiring, somehow something emerges for the next session. I think it’s been the same for other people.

The ‘something’ that ‘somehow’ ‘emerges’ is often the causal result of an occurrence *after* the encounter with the art object. Indeed Graeme, speaking about a piece of prose he’d written following the Diane Arbus exhibition, said that it was a photograph shown to him on the bus and taken by another member of the Group of:

[a] lady cleaning a coffee machine inside a diner or restaurant, or whatever it was...she was just working away at the machinery and that was actually an inspiration...it wasn’t the original exhibition.

He had worked in one of Arbus’s photographs – ‘Jack Dracula at a Bar, 1961’ showing a heavily tattooed, bare-chested man – and his short story was about a meeting between ‘Jack’ and ‘Lilly’ the lady working in the diner. He had also played with including the titles of as many songs as possible in the story: he said,

It was a bit of fun at the time; a prose sprang out. I probably had had that idea for quite a while, and in this instance it kind of seemed appropriate because some of the leading named characters like ‘Jack’ and ‘Lillian’ – well, there’s plenty of song titles with Lilly, you know. Then I remembered the Bob Dylan song, it’s not Lilly, it’s Diane and

the Jack of Hearts...I've forgotten the original song title, but it's something like that! Many of the Group had been struck by the tattooed body of 'Jack Dracula' during the tour; comments such as 'I can't get past the tattoos. They're a fence'; 'You don't do that to yourself', 'It's difficult to tell where the shadows stop and the tattoos start' were typical. However, Graeme had said, 'I'm just struck by how regular-looking a guy he is...I can relate to him'. While he described the exhibition as 'uninspiring' and, as many of them did, 'disturbing' – he had managed to find 'inspiration' somewhere. This had been in someone else's photograph, in the title of various songs, in a latent idea in his mind, and perhaps in the 'regular' feel of 'Jack Dracula' despite his unusual appearance. So the Prototype for Graeme's story is not straightforwardly the Index 'Jack Dracula at a Bar, 1961'. Neither was it for Andrew who spoke to me about his own poem:

That one had almost no connection to the original image at all but there was something in it that led me to that scene...[It was] the coincidence of his nickname 'Jack Dracula' and the assonance of 'ack'/'ac' which would seem, looking at the picture, to be the only reason why he was given that name. And then it turned out, when you trawl around on the internet, that he did Bela Lugosi impressions and that's why he was called 'Dracula'. So that was just sheer coincidence relating to the picture...the picture had nothing to do with it in the end.

When I asked him if he ever went back to look at an artwork, either to the gallery or on the internet, he said:

In some ways I'd rather not return. Quite often my starting point is quite a few steps away from the picture anyway.

In both cases the writers are not locating primary agency in the art object; indeed, they indicate that it is often an incidental, or random, cause of their own work. At any rate the flow of agency has been deflected and refracted – in Gellian terms - through several other Indexes

before it results in the Index that is their poem or prose work. Here descriptions of the creative process have much in common with Ingold and Hallam's theorization of creativity as 'improvisation'. Not only is it 'inseparable' from 'the matrix of relations in which it is embedded' but it is also something that takes place on the hoof rather than being pre-determined (2007:9).

This lack of pre-determined intention is related to my second point – the downplaying of their own roles as agents or Artists. A pattern emerged in interviews where Group members attributed agency to an unknown entity, something that appeared to be 'beyond' or 'above' themselves as human agents, but was not the art object. As Graeme explains above, 'the prose sprang' almost of its own accord. This way of describing 'inspiration' or 'creativity' is not uncommon (Clark 1997). Katharine, one of the oldest members of the Group, told me:

I can't write if I'm staring at something. It has to come in. I call it coming in aslant, and something comes.

Similarly, Andrew said this when describing the way his laconic and abstract poems take shape over the two week break between the tour and writing session:

[I don't] write short things in order to get them finished quickly. It's completely the opposite; they start off very varied and gradually distill themselves down, or you leave them out in the open air and things disappear.

To Graeme, the 'thrill' of writing is the surprising appearance of an object:

None of this existed two weeks ago. Here I am with a story and characters and the rest of it. Where did that come from? It feels like it somehow came out of the ether, and apparently, I did nothing.

Indeed the Group appear to de-sanctify the process of creativity over and over again. Even here, where we might potentially read what they say as a form of 'possession' or channeling

of creative inspiration which is somehow beyond their rational control, they are always careful to dispel any ‘preciousness’ – as one of them phrased it – about the process. This is partly, though not exclusively, because they place a value on the process itself, rather than the product. Very few of them wish to publish or print their work (although some have done) – this is not their primary motivation for writing. These ideas are in contrast to the gallery’s assumptions about a desire to create ‘modern masterpieces’ or strive for outcomes such as exhibitions. The importance here is placed – as it is Ingold’s take on creativity – on ‘process and movement’ rather than ‘product and results’ (2007:3).

Employing Ingold’s work has highlighted the contrast between the museum’s assumptions about creativity and some of the claims the subjects themselves make about the process. While the understanding of the process and value of creativity implied by the museum’s pedagogy is based on the notion of ‘innovation’, the Group’s description accords better with the idea of ‘improvisation’. Furthermore, Gell’s framework has enabled a description of what is a complex network of relations between art objects and persons. While gallery educators privilege the object as the Prototype for further creativity, the Group members see it as simply one amongst many possible Prototypes. Indeed, what emerged over the course of interviews and time was that the Group often cited *each other* as ‘agents’, or what Group members have *said* as the Prototype for their own work. I mentioned earlier an awareness on the part of the gallery education staff that their own roles were diminishing over time. During the time I have spent with the Group the number of self-led sessions has significantly increased. This has been partly owing to a lack of funds, but it is also part of a growing understanding amongst Group members that it is the Group itself that is at the heart of their creativity.

The ‘shared response to something’ – the importance of the Group.

It interested me how often a particular painting came up in the interviews I conducted – one which had been discussed on a self-led tour. It was Andrew who had shown them *An Interior with a Young Violinist*, 1637 by Gerrit Dou, and it was this painting which found its way onto the cover of the book of their poems published alongside the exhibition which Jenny organized (out of the twenty poems in the booklet, three had been ‘inspired’ by the Dou). Speaking of this painting Joan, who worked as a human resources manager before taking early retirement, told me:

I really liked the poem that I wrote which wouldn’t have come – I would have walked past that painting...If we hadn’t been – well, it was Andrew, if it hadn’t been for Andrew who initiated the discussion around it, this wouldn’t have happened.

Similarly, Graeme said:

I would bet most of us in our group feel quite a close association with this painting now – in fact, it was Andrew who took us to it one day and talked about it.

Holding up the booklet Jeanette, a founding member of the Group, said to me:

It is stimulating when you hear other people’s take on things. I mean, for example, the painting on the front of this - that was one of the chaps in the group. It was one of the days when we were being left to our own devices. I don’t know what stimulated him to particularly choose this painting, and it’s a very small painting – and it was absolutely fascinating and I would never have spent any time looking at it. I probably wouldn’t have noticed it.

The value of this art object appears to lie in the context (of talk) through which it is encountered. While the painting itself appears to take on more significance – do more of the ‘inspirational’ work – in this example than in previous ones, what is interesting is that the claims made about it attribute significant agency to Andrew’s role as a mediator. This was an agency that was never attributed to the tour guides (there would have been countless paintings

they would not have noticed if the guides had not pointed them out) but Andrew's position as a member of the Group was vital to them. Andrew's own poem about the Gerrit Dou painting is one that he likes very much. He said:

[P]art of why I like it is that it's not tied to the picture...it's about the year it was painted and things that were happening at that time. In my poem I picked up on the fact of the shadow and the globe...I probably look at pictures very badly so far as an artist is concerned.

He too located agency in the talk:

It's partly the talking - the talking together about our responses to the artworks. It's in that sense that it could be a coffee cup, ...it's something about the shared response to something.

In the writing feedback sessions the Group sit around a rectangular table in the education centre of the gallery's main building. Each member brings photocopies of their work and places these in front of the freelance writer taking the session. The writer then decides on the order in which these are looked at; sometimes they are grouped according to the art object from which they take their 'inspiration', sometimes prose is discussed first, poetry second. Despite the fact that in interviews they dismissed the importance of the original art work, it is surprising how many of them reference it in their finished work – either as a title, or simply a reference at the bottom. The writer then reads their piece to the Group; occasionally, it is also read out by someone else. A discussion about the piece of writing then ensues; here is one such excerpt from a session following an exhibition of Picasso's work. The Group member in question, Martha, had chosen to write a poem based on an early painting called 'Girl in a Chemise'. The writer working with them on this occasion was Jane. The tour guide had told us that this painting was part of what is often referred to as Picasso's 'blue period'.

Jane: What do people think of the colours?

- Andrew: The word 'blue' is repeated too often, especially when it is referring to blue things like 'waves' and 'veins'.
- Martha: Yes. [She makes a note of Andrew's comments]
- Katharine: You changed a word when you read it out. You have written 'yellow' but you said 'gold'.
- Kirsty: I liked that. The change, I mean.
- Martha: I'm not sure if the poem is about the painter being depressed or the woman.
- Andrew: Does it matter? The ambiguity is good.
- Martha: Yes, but what do I want this to be? How far am I relying on the fact that others have seen the painting?
- Jane: I'd also take out 'red'. I think it's one colour too many. Yellow/gold is preferable tonally.

It is often the case that the professional writer working with the Group has not attended the tour; sometimes they have not seen the paintings at all. Lydia, the writer who most frequently works with them, said part of her job was to assess the writing as a 'stand alone piece'. During sessions I observed her making comments about changing words, line endings, removing phrases or sections of writing. 'At its best,' she told me, these sessions are 'a creative dialogue'. It is clear from the extract above that the creativity is still in process during the session. Attending the sessions, I was struck by the frankness of the discussion and the trust they placed in each other, not just intellectually, but emotionally. They were happy to share and receive criticism openly; close attention to these interactions reveals why 'agency' is located in a variety of places, people and objects.

Conclusion.

This paper has argued that the supposed flow of agency which is suggested by inspiration as a theory of creativity, and which underlies the public pedagogy of this gallery's workshops, needs to be revisited. Using Ingold's theory and Gell's framework reveals that in this case, creativity flows in all directions and that inspiration is often *not* the starting point, but might be the mid-point or end-point of creative processes. Members of this Group are now 'inspired' by the artworks *because* they have written about them. Inspiration can occur in front of the artwork, or at home, on the bus, in the next session. They can be inspired by each other's comments, each other's work. Even the 'work' of editing and revising their writing is referred to in terms that accord with ideas of inspiration. This is in marked contrast, for example, to the accounts of other writers who see the original 'flow' of creativity as inspiration, but the revision and refinement stage as uninspiring 'work' (Reed 2011). What they enjoy and describe as 'exciting' or 'thrilling' is precisely the multi-directional flows of agency that constitute creativity as they see it. Andrew summed this up:

Having found the process it then becomes quite nice to see the beginning. Maybe there was an earlier beginning... maybe there was actually no beginning. Maybe they're actually two intersecting processes which are interrupting each other.

The gallery's main pedagogical thrust is to ensure the public's engagement with its collection. For this reason the artists and art historians involved with the Painting Words group tended to place value on *what* was seen and *what* was said. Lydia, the writer, on the other hand told me that the most important thing about the tour was the fact that 'it happened'. So, if it is not the art object, or the expertise of the artists and art historians that provides a focus for going to the museum at all, what is it?

Possibilities for 'public' pedagogy?

Finally, it might be useful to return to Biesta's work and to the distinctions he makes between a pedagogy *for* the public, a pedagogy *of* the public, and a pedagogy of 'publicness'. One could argue that the gallery is attempting to move beyond the idea that its role is simply to teach, or instruct, the public. Instead, in understanding that pedagogies can be enacted from 'within democratic processes and practices' it fits comfortably in Biesta's second category of a pedagogy *for* the public (2012:692). Rather than privileging the objects and the knowledge of educators, it is placing importance on 'learners' and the learning process. The gallery's 'educational work' is based on a belief that people can be empowered to become critical or creative subjects within the gallery space. The *public* nature of this pedagogy lies in the notion of clearing a space for critique and it is similar to arguments put forward by Henry Giroux (1994, 2004b) and Henry Jenkins (1992, 2008) about the agency of those recipients of popular culture who resist, adapt, participate and feed back. These are the kinds of 'freedom' that Biesta would argue rely on the notion of the sovereign self (a liberal freedom); whereas a pedagogy that is truly public is concerned, not with the freedom of the individual to think or act how they wish, but instead with the 'quality of human togetherness' (a democratic freedom). This is a useful distinction and one which Biesta conceptualizes, using the work of Hannah Arendt, as a freedom brought about through mutually acknowledged 'beginnings' (2012:688). For Arendt acting, and therefore being part of the world, is figured as a 'beginning' that has to be acknowledged by others, rather than being a private experience. If one was to imagine, as Biesta does, that the creation of opportunities for these beginnings is an enactment of a pedagogy of 'publicness', we could see the Group's creative processes in precisely this light. The fact that the context of interactions - the Group itself - is held to be more important than the art object or the educator illustrates this. Being in a group, whether it is while looking at the art object or discussing the writing, is the mutual acknowledgement of

each other's 'beginning'. As Andrew told me, 'it's the talking *together*' [my emphasis]... 'it's something about the *shared* response to something' that is at the heart of what they value.

In this paper I have used the work of Tim Ingold and Alfred Gell to describe an engagement or interaction between '(art) objects' and 'persons' that is about something *other* than knowledge and interpretation. I have also suggested, in the light of Biesta's recent problematizing of the concept of public pedagogy, the limitations imposed on educational processes by an insistence on learning and the production of critical/creative subjects. In this case, I argue, the pedagogical intentions of the gallery have been transformed into something much *more* successful than they set out to achieve. The fact that the Group do not see their creativity as restricted to either the gallery space, the objects inside it, or what the educators do/say to them, is something which can be viewed as a successful enactment of a different order of public pedagogy. Locating, as I have done here, *some* of the reasons for the value the Group has for its members challenges and could revise some of the gallery's own assumptions about what its educational work should and *can* do. It is understandable that an institution whose existence is justified through its function - housing, protecting and displaying objects of 'value' - would see its pedagogical task as located in those objects. However, the example provided by the 'Painting Words' Group outlines another possibility – that the educational role can stem from its function as a place of gathering, or 'public togetherness', a place where both 'objects' and 'persons', or the network of their interactions, can be equally inspirational.

Acknowledgements:

I would like to thank the members of 'Painting Words' for their time, kindness, interest, and for welcoming me into their Group. My thanks also to the gallery, its staff, and to 'Jenny' in particular, without whom none of the above would have existed.

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